

1215-25 WEST 18TH STREET

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

PRELIMINARY STAFF SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

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COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS
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THALIA HALL
1215-25 West 18th Street
Chicago, Illinois

Date of Construction: 1892

Architects: Frederick E. Faber and William F. Pagels

During its period of rapid growth in the late nineteenth century, Chicago was settled as a network of neighborhoods defined by the ethnic origin of their inhabitants. Although most immigrants had been motivated to move to the United States for economic or political reasons, their sense of comfort in their new surroundings depended in large part on the cultural familiarity provided by the ethnic enclaves in which they settled. Linguistic and religious traditions were the essential unifying forces in the development of the social, residential, and business life of immigrant communities. Two types of buildings housed activities that sought to maintain and perpetuate the distinct identity of the ethnic community: the church, which carried the responsibility of the religious heritage, and the public halls, which were the centers for organizational and theatrical gatherings. Thalia Hall, as an example of the latter type, is representative of the cultural pride that has been integral in the history of the immigrant communities of Chicago.

The number of immigrants from the regions of Bohemia and Moravia in what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire increased dramatically after the U.S. Civil War. In Chicago, the Bohemian community grew quickly after the Great Fire of 1871, having an estimated population of 45,000 by the late 1880s. Most of these individuals lived in an enclave on the near Southwest Side that was bounded by Sixteenth Street, Halsted Street, Twentieth Street, and Ashland Avenue, an area that was known as Pilsen, after the second largest city in Bohemia. The location was made attractive by its close proximity to a number of major industrial employers, including the McCormick Reaper Works, the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad yards, various lumber yards, and the garment manufacturing facilities of the Hart, Schaffner & Marx Company, the largest clothing maker in the nation at the turn of the century.

The Bohemian community was characterized by the unusual diversity of its members' religious and political beliefs. The residents of Pilsen attended Catholic and Protestant churches, were active members of the Democratic and Socialist political parties, and sustained a large "Free Thought" organization that sponsored lecture programs and its own school. In addition, they founded benevolent societies and were active in the labor reform movement, and they supported a number of amateur musical and dramatic associations that performed traditional and newly written productions in their native Czech language.

Eighteenth Street developed into the major commercial and institutional thoroughfare of Pilsen. The site of Thalia Hall, on Eighteenth between Racine and Allport avenues, was centrally located and stood across the street from two established institutions of prominence, St. Procopius Church, the "Mother Church" of Chicago's Bohemian Catholics, and the headquarters of the Czech Slavic Benevolent Society. By 1892 the extent of the continuing commercial development of Eighteenth Street induced John Dusek, a Bohemian immigrant who owned a saloon on Allport Avenue immediately south of Eighteenth, to make plans for the redevelopment of the site of his business and that of the adjoining corner property.

The public hall was a common building type in the many ethnic neighborhoods of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Chicago. As centers for social and political meetings, fraternal gatherings, and live musical and theatrical productions, they were essential in the pre-radio, pre-cinema era of community activity and entertainment. Often including spaces for commercial activities on the first floor, the public hall could have offices, training facilities for apprentices in the trades, dining facilities, or residences on the upper floors in addition to its main hall. Although many buildings of this type were built by organizations, an equal number were built by private individuals as speculative ventures, supported by the rental income of the stores as well as by that generated through rental of the hall.

The proliferation of social, political, benevolent, and performing arts organizations in Pilsen, and the small number of places for them to meet, made the choice of a public hall an attractive one for Dusek. Rather than a simple assembly hall, he intended to create a theater that would be a cultural center for the Bohemian community. Seeking to address the most pressing needs of the community at large, he planned to provide high quality commercial and residential spaces as part of his development. Dusek chose the Chicago architectural firm of Faber and Pagels to prepare plans for his proposed theater, stores, and flats.

Frederick E. Faber was born in 1852 in Copenhagen, Denmark, the son of the architect Hans P. Faber. Educated at the Royal Academy of Copenhagen in art, architecture, and civil engineering, he spent six years designing breakwaters, railroads, and factories in his native land before taking an extended tour of central Europe and Italy. In 1879 he emigrated to the United States, settling in Chicago and founding his architectural practice the following year. He formed a partnership with the architect William F. Pagels in 1888. The firm designed many large residential buildings for affluent, central European

immigrant clients, particularly in the “Polish Gold Coast” of Wicker Park. They also designed a number of large public buildings, notably including an addition to Cook County Hospital.

The building that Faber and Pagels designed for Dusek rises to a height of four stories, with five commercial spaces along the ground floor and twenty-one apartments above on the Eighteenth Street frontage. Designed after the Romanesque revival style made popular by the prominent Boston architect Henry Hobson Richardson, the first three floors are almost entirely clad with the rough rusticated masonry that characterized the style (Figure 1). The exceptions to this surface treatment, found in the cluster columns of the entrances, the string courses, the alternating courses of rusticated and ashlar facings on the second floor, the third floor arches, and the ashlar facing of the fourth floor dormers and towers, serve to articulate the mass and emphasize the monumental aspect of the facade. The ground floor elevation is punctuated by a rhythm of rectangular storefront openings that alternate with the massive stone arches of the residential entrances. The elevation is asymmetrical, having towers of differing size and shape at its east and west ends. Variety was emphasized in the profile of the roofline which includes hip, truncated hip, mansard front, and dome designs.

At the time the building was built, the residential apartments were considered to be among the finest in Pilsen, offering to tenants what were described in the contemporary press as “all the modern conveniences.” The owner, John Dusek, his wife Amerka, and their three children were among the original tenants of the building. Dusek also reopened his saloon in the corner store, which was connected to the adjoining theater by an enclosed passage, the better to gain patronage from those attending its functions.

The most important feature of the building was the theater, which shares a common fire wall with the commercial and residential section, opening on to Allport Avenue. Planned as a independent entity, its entrance is marked by a monumental Romanesque-inspired arch that supports a four-story tower topped with an onion dome (Figure 2). The theater is on the second floor and is reached by flights of cast-iron stairs, with finely detailed balusters and newels. Equipped as a professional facility, it has a proscenium arch framing the stage at the east end of the room, and a full fly loft for the storage and change of scenic backdrops. Because the theater was also intended to be used for meetings and social gatherings, including dances, the floor was flat rather than raked, allowing for versatility in the arrangement of the chairs and fixtures. In addition to its spacious main floor, a gallery extended around three sides of the room, terminating in two ornamental roofed boxes on each side of the proscenium (Figure 3). Large arched windows on the south wall made an abundance of natural light available when desired for daytime events; however, these could be closed with iron shutters if necessary. Contemporary descriptions indicate that the hall was able to accommodate approximately 2,000 persons.

Dusek intended the theater to be the center for the performing arts in Pilsen rather than a simple assembly hall and emphasized his intent by naming it “Thalia Hall” in honor of the Greek Muse of comedy and pastoral poetry (Figure 4). The average building of this

type usually cost in the range of \$75,000 to \$100,000 to build. The projected cost of Dusek's hall, however, was \$145,000. The difference was manifest in the comparative simplicity of the architectural and decorative detail of the typical hall building; Thalia Hall was finely appointed and carefully detailed in ornamental plaster, metal, and wood trim. These elements were combined to present an effect of opulence and grandeur that was more suited to a small opera house than the typical public hall.

The building permit for Thalia Hall was issued on April 25, 1892. Construction continued throughout that year, leading to its completion by the end of April the next year when the Ludvik Dramatic Players gave their first performance in the Thalia Hall theater.

Frantisek Ludvik was born in Prague, Bohemia, on March 3, 1843. Trained in the National Theater of Prague, he worked as a professional actor in Bohemia until founding his own company, the Ludvik Dramatic Players, in the late 1870s. In 1892, Ludvik began soliciting Bohemian-American financial support for a tour of the United States by his company. There was no professional Czech language theater in the U.S. at the time, and he sought to tour the Bohemian communities and perform in Chicago as a complement to the World's Columbian Exposition to be held the next year. Led by a group of Chicagoans, a committee was formed to provide financial assistance for Ludvik's venture.

On March 8, 1893, the Ludvik Players departed Bremen, Germany on the steamer "America," arriving in New York on the 20th. With the director and his wife, the company included twelve men and ten women. The group was met at the dock by members of the New York Bohemian community who provided housing to them for the duration of their stay in New York. Their first performance, and the first professional dramatic presentation in the Czech language in the United States, was *Gazdina Roba* (Gazda's Robe) by Gabriela Preis, given at the New York Central Opera House on March 26. After a twelve-day run, they continued their tour with stops in Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Detroit before reaching Chicago at the end of April. In Chicago they played at the old Haymarket Theater in the Loop and, as a gesture of thanks to the community that was largely responsible for making their trip possible, in Pilsen at the Czech Slavik Benevolent Aid Society hall and at Thalia Hall. After four weeks in Chicago, Ludvik's troupe continued its tour, playing the Bijou Opera House in Milwaukee, the Minneapolis Opera, and at venues in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and in Omaha and Lincoln, Nebraska.

They returned to Chicago in August with the apparent intent to make a final series of presentations before returning to Prague. On their arrival they were met by Ludvik's friends Joseph Smaha, the director of the National Theater of Prague, and Joseph H. Capek, a musician and composer. Under Smaha's leadership as guest director, and with Capek directing an orchestra of local musicians, the Ludvik Players performed the popular Bohemian opera *Prodana Nevesta* (The Bartered Bride) by Bedrick Smetana at the Haymarket Theater on August 20, 1893. Among the first operas written in the Czech language, it had been performed previously only in German translation in the United States. Considered to be an important work and well known for its patriotic themes, it had earned for its composer the popular title "the Beethoven of Bohemia."

The critical and financial response to the several performances of *Prodana Nevesta* convinced Ludvik to stay in the U. S. and make Chicago his base of operations. Four members of the touring company returned to Prague that fall with Smaha; eighteen of the players, joined by musical director Capek, remained in Chicago. Taking the name Ludvik's Bohemian Dramatic Society of Chicago (Ludvikovo Divadlo Chicaga), they made Thalia Hall theater their home stage with the beginning of the winter season. Although the Ludvik Dramatic Society shared the Thalia stage with local amateur productions, traveling vaudeville acts, and eventually cinematic presentations, the hall became known unofficially as the Hall of the Ludvik Players (Sidlo Ludvikovcu).

The Ludvik Dramatic Society performed traditional Bohemian dramas and operettas, and classics from a number of countries in Czech translation, including works by William Shakespeare, Moliere, Oscar Wilde, Georges Bizet, and Giacomo Puccini. Of equal importance to the residents of Pilsen, however, were the newly written works produced by the members of the company. Most of these used themes based on the Bohemian perspective of life in the United States, and some used events in American history as their dramatic settings. It was this original material that formed the greatest body of work performed by the company when they returned to Bohemia for a three-month tour in 1898. Among the plays given critical acclaim in Prague were such titles as *V srdci Chicaga* (Heart of Chicago), *Sever proti Jihu* (North versus South), and *Bordynkari* (The Tenants).

The Ludvik Dramatic Society continued to perform and produce new work at Thalia Hall until 1920. After Frantisek Ludvik died on October 24, 1910, his wife, Bohumila, and son, Frantisek Jr., continued the company, and in March, 1918, they celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of their arrival in the U.S. with a gala at Thalia Hall. Three of the original cast members on the 1893 tour were still with the company, a number of their children had joined, and former members returned for the celebration. The success of professional theater in the Bohemian community was considered an anomaly since larger ethnic communities in Chicago, in particular the Germans, whose population was more than three times that of the Bohemians, had failed to sustain similar efforts.

During the First World War, Thalia Hall became one of many centers for patriotic meetings in support of the effort to create an independent state in the Czech homeland. By this time Chicago had become the second largest Bohemian city in the world, after Prague, and it became the headquarters of the most important organization working in the cause of independence, the Bohemian National Alliance. This group, which allied in 1915 with the American Slovak League to become the Czech-Slovak Alliance, engaged in fund-raising and political activities that resulted in the proposal made to the Allies by President Woodrow Wilson to create the state of Czechoslovakia.

Since its opening, the Thalia Hall stage had been host to theater, vaudeville, and musical performances. In addition to these activities, films and newsreels began to be presented during the war years. The success of these cinematic presentations led in 1920 to the temporary closing of the theater for reconditioning as a movie house. After the renovation, the Ludvik Dramatic Society continued to maintain its offices in Thalia Hall, but

its performances were scheduled at a number of venues, including the Sokol Havilcek-Tyrs Hall at Twenty-sixth Street and Lawndale Avenue, and at the Sokol Chicago Hall at 2345 South Kedzie Avenue. Few theatrical performances were given at Thalia Hall after the renovation.

In the spring of 1922, Karel Capek's play *R. U. R.*, or Rossum's Universal Robots, was given its premier in Prague. The play was an immediate sensation and was arguably the first cultural statement of the new Czechoslovak nation to gain international attention, introducing a new concept of science fiction to the stage and adding the word "robot" to many European languages. Frantisek Horlivy, a member of the Ludvik Dramatic Society, saw the play performed in Prague that spring and brought his ideas for its production back to Chicago. On October 22, 1922, the Ludvik Dramatic Society made the first Bohemian language presentation of *R. U. R.* in the United States at Sokol Chicago Hall. The great popularity of the play encouraged the troupe to give a number of repeat performances, including at least one at Thalia Hall, among the last of the presentations they were to make from that stage.

The 1920s was a "golden era" for the Bohemian community of Chicago. Proud of their assistance in the cause of Czechoslovak independence, participants in and benefactors of the economic expansion that followed the war, they also exercised their greatest impact on local politics with the election of Anton Cermak, a Pilsen resident, as a Cook County Commissioner and in 1931 as Mayor of Chicago. However, new economic opportunities encouraged individuals to leave older neighborhoods for new ones, resulting in a dispersal of the community over a wider area. As the upwardly mobile left Pilsen, their places were not taken by new Bohemian immigrants. Although the Bohemian-American community had been invigorated by a continuous influx of immigrants from 1870 to 1914, the war and the subsequent founding of an independent state in the homeland ended the migration to the United States. For the first time the number of active ethnic organizations in Pilsen and the number of members in them began to decrease. This loss of population, coupled with the advent of the Great Depression, put an end to a number of the cultural forces in Pilsen, including newspapers, organizations, and the Ludvik Dramatic Society.

The Thalia Hall theater remained in general use through the middle of the 1960s. In spite of an extended period of inactivity, its interior remains in an exceptional state of preservation, retaining most of its original details and fixtures. Pilsen, which has continued to be a port of entry for new immigrants, is now a Mexican-American community, and a Latino arts consortium has hopes of returning the hall to its original use as a cultural center. The unusually high quality of the design and craftsmanship in the appointments of the stores and apartments, as well as those in the theater, are exemplary of the best of historic urban vernacular architecture. Of the many public halls built in Chicago, Thalia Hall is among the most remarkable survivors not only for its design and state of preservation but for the cultural importance it had and may continue to have in the life of its community.

Figure 1: A general view of Thalia Hall. Rusticated arches over the residential entrances alternate with the glazed shop fronts on the 18th Street frontage, on the left in this view. The entrance to the theater is marked by the monumental arch on the right. The corner store, its entrance distinguished by the massive piers that support the tower above, was the space occupied by John Dusek for his second saloon.

(Photograph by Timothy N. Wittman for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks)



Figure 2: The entrance to the Thalia Hall theater. In spite of the addition of the fire escape and the recent replacement of the doors and their frames, the exterior retains a high degree of integrity.

(Photograph by Timothy N. Wittman for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks)

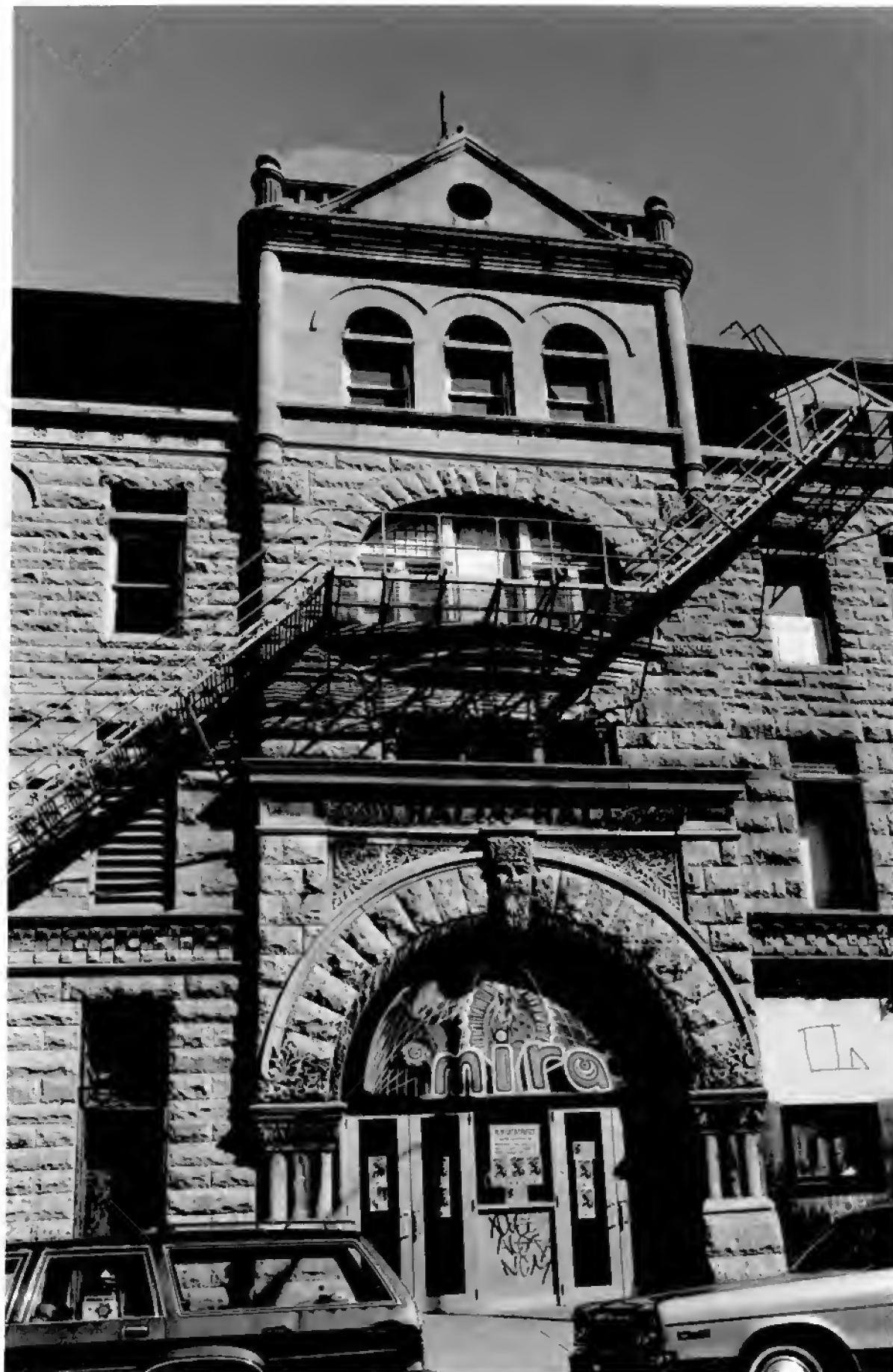


Figure 3: Interior view of the Thalia Hall theater, showing the pressed metal boxes at the left of the proscenium arch.





Figure 4: The theater was named after one of the nine daughters of Mnemosyne and Zeus, known collectively as the Muses, each of whom presided over the activities of an art or science in ancient Greek mythology. Thalia, the Muse of comedy and pastoral poetry, was also one of the “Three Graces” who were the mythical source of charm and beauty.

(Photograph by Timothy N. Wittman for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks)

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Additional research material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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